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# WHO WERE THE *CHIHILGĀNĪ*, THE FORTY SLAVES OF SULṬĀN SHAMS AL-DĪN ILTUTMISH OF DELHI?[1]

*By* Gavin Hambly

The three decades which separate the death of Sulṭān Shams al-Din Iltutmish[2] in 633/1236 from the seizure of the throne by Ghiyāth al-Dīn Balban in 664/1266 form a period of quite exceptional political instability in the early history of the Delhi Sultanate, especially during the years prior to the accession of Sulṭān Nāṣir al-Dīn Maḥmūd in 644/1246. One feature of this period, emphasized by all historians, is the dominant role assumed by a group of prominent slave commanders known as the *chihilgānī*, the Forty Slaves of Sulṭān Shams al-Dīn Iltutmish, who throughout these thirty years appear to have exercised a more or less uninterrupted control over a succession of relatively feeble rulers who were, for the most part, mere puppets in their hands.[3]

It would be useful to know who the *chihilgānī* were and precisely what role they fulfilled in this struggling Muslim state so recently established upon the very fringes of the *Dār al-Islām*, but unfortunately the sources for the period say very little about them, although this has not prevented historians from giving free rein to their imagination when approaching the subject. One of the most cautious, Stanley Lane-Poole, wrote at a time when the study of the Delhi Sultanate was still in its infancy, but his view of the *chihilgānī* exemplifies the attitude of the older generation of historians of Muslim India which eventually found its way into *The Cambridge History of India*.[4] In Lane-Poole's view, the *chihilgānī* were, quite simply, overweaning Praetorians:

> The slave system had grown stronger by the successful careers of Aybek and Altamish. The latter had formed a corps of Turkish mamliks known as " the Forty ", and these men, profiting by the removal of the master's hand, shared among themselves the wealth and power of the kingdom. The free-born men who had served Altamish with great ability in various offices were removed, and all control was in the hands of " the Forty ".[5]

Over thirty years later the young scholar, Ibn Hasan, reacted strongly against this traditional over-simplified assumption, and offered a most interesting alternative theory—although one for which, unfortunately, direct evidence is lacking:

> .... Shams-ud-dīn also created a body of loyal supporters to the throne and kept it at the centre. It was intended as a check upon the powers and ambitions of the military chiefs, who divided the resources of the country and the army among themselves. This body of loyalists is known as " The Forty ".

[1] An expanded version of this paper was read at a meeting of the Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association at San Diego, California, in August 1969.

[2] Controversy on the subject of the form of this Sulṭān's name has surely been finally laid to rest by Simon Digby in his paper, " Iletmish or Iltutmish? A Reconsideration of the Name of the Dehli Sultan ", in *Iran* VIII (1970), pp. 57–64.

[3] The order of succession of the Shamsī Sulṭāns was:

(1) Shams al-Dīn Iltutmish (607–633/1210–1236)
- (2) Rukn al-Dīn Fīrūz (633/1236)
  - (5) 'Alā' al-Dīn Mas'ūd (639–644/1242–1246)
- (3) Raẓiyya (633–637/1236–1240)
- (4) Mu'izz al-Dīn Bahrām (637–639/1240–1242)
- (6) Nāṣir al-Dīn Maḥmūd (644–664/1246–1266)

[4] *The Cambridge History of India*, edited by Sir Wolseley Haig (Cambridge, 1928), III, p. 61. I. H. Qureshi maintains substantially the same view in *The Cambridge History of Islam*, edited by P. M. Holt, Ann K. S. Lambton and Bernard Lewis (Cambridge, 1970), II, pp. 6–7.

[5] S. Lane-Poole, *Mediaeval India under Mohammedan Rule* (London, 1903), p. 76.

It was a very useful device, and it worked very well under the Slave dynasty. It gave full support to the dynasty, and, in spite of the weakness of Shams-ud-dīn's successors, the throne remained in his family. The changes were made in the interest of the kingdom and the throne, and weak and worthless kings were always replaced by stronger and more capable ones. The experiment limited the ambitions of the Muslim element of the kingdom to a very small group, and a tradition of dynastic rule was established. But the success of the device and the experiment depended upon the unity of the party at court, together with the provincial military chiefs. This became impossible, and the domination of the Forty was later on resented and opposed by other sections of the ruling class.[6]

More recently, A. B. M. Habibullah has given an added dimension to this theory although, again, without any data to support it.

A large progeny was not favourable to a king's interests, while a number of tried and efficient slaves having no other interest than to serve the master's family, was a sure asset. Iltutmish had no illusions about the capacity of his sons and the only way to counteract the opposite tendency seemed to lie in organizing his personal retainers into a party who would stand by his family and thereby uphold his absolutist monarchy. Like the Muizzi and Qutbi slaves, the Shamsi slaves were thus allowed to form themselves into a political group which, after his death, received the collective name of the " Forty ". By absorbing or destroying the adherents of former kings they were enabled to reign supreme after his death. . . .

Thus there came into being a curious phenomenon, a party of bondsmen pledged to support the power of their master's family who considered the state a vast household in which outsiders could have no place. The Sultanate was converted into a kind of household polity.[7]

K. A. Nizami has adopted an altogether different position. He apparently sees the *chihilgānī* as a cohesive group of slave commanders within a larger ruling élite, bound together by mutual concern lest their monopoly of office be threatened either, on the one hand, by the intrusion of free-born Central Asian immigrants fleeing into India in the wake of the Mongol holocausts, or, on the other, by the emergence of an indigenous Muslim élite born and bred in the sub-continent. " It was probably the growing assertion of the Indian elements in the body politic ", he suggests, " which led the Turkish maliks to organize themselves into a corporate body known as *Chahlganian* ".[8]

We have here three distinct theories regarding the *chihilgānī*: that they were a band of Turkish slave-commanders who formed a selfish oligarchy of which the *raison d'être* was the exclusion of outsiders from those offices in the state which they claimed as their monopoly; that they were a cohesive group deliberately brought into being by Shams al-Dīn Iltutmish to impose upon the infant Sultanate a specific institutional character; that they were a tightly-knit faction bound together by their need to protect the monopoly of office hitherto enjoyed by the Sulṭān's Turkish slave commanders from interlopers (e.g. free-born refugees from Central Asia and Iran, and the expanding class of native-born Muslims). In fact, however, all three interpretations, although neither mutually exclusive nor lacking in general plausibility, rest on a very thin foundation of fact.

Jūzjānī, the chronicler of both the Shansabānīd dynasty of Ghūr and of the so-called " Slave Kings " of Delhi, at whose court he wrote the *Ṭabaqāt-i Nāṣirī*, makes no mention of the *chihilgānī*. It seems probable, therefore, that the earliest known reference to them occurs in the *Ta'rīkh-i Fīrūz Shāhī* written by Żiyā' al-Dīn Baranī and completed sometime between the accession of Sulṭān Fīrūz Shāh Tughluq in 752/1351 and his own death around 758/1357, or, in other words, almost ninety years after the accession to the throne of Ghiyāth al-Dīn Balban. It is from Baranī, or from later writers of the Mughul period who drew upon Baranī as a source, that modern historians have derived what little is known regarding the *chihilgānī*. That Jūzjānī, their contemporary and an intimate with at least one

[6] Ibn Hasan, *The Central Structure of the Mughal Empire* (Oxford, 1936), pp. 44–45.

[7] A. B. M. Habibullah, *The Foundations of Muslim Rule in India* (Allahabad, 1961), pp. 345–346. The assumption that the members of a ruler's family were, on balance, less to be trusted than his personal slaves was clearly stated by the Saljūq *vazīr*, Niẓām al-Mulk, in the eleventh century:

One obedient slave is better than three hundred sons;
For the latter desire their father's death, the former long life for his master.

*Siyar al-Mulūk* (*Siyāsat-nāma*), edited by H. Darke (Tehran, 1962), p. 150, tr. *idem*, *The Book of Government, or Rules for Kings* (London, 1960), p. 121.

[8] K. A. Nizami, *Some Aspects of Religion and Politics in India during the 13th Century* (Aligarh, 1961), p. 127.

of them (Balban), should have avoided using the term is perhaps not altogether surprising. It may well have been in origin a popular nickname, bandied about the streets of the capital but not on the lips of those who associated with the ruling élite, especially if, from the outset, it was an expression of opprobrium, as it may well have been.

It is probably as an expression of opprobrium that Baranī uses it, conscious of its effect upon his own contemporaries who, like himself, would have derived much of their knowledge of the events of the preceding century from oral traditions preserved from generation to generation among the old Delhi families. Dr. Hardy's warning regarding the *Ta'rīkh-i Fīrūz Shāhī*, that it " is not an annal or chronicle; it is an important example of didactic historiography in Islam ", needs to be taken constantly into consideration.[9] Whether writing of his own lifetime or of an earlier period, Baranī was outraged by what he regarded as the scandal of rulers entrusting offices of responsibility to low-born upstarts, a category elastic enough to include both infidel Hindus and perhaps all but a handful of Muslim *ghulāms*. Not a great deal is known about the history of Baranī's family but they had certainly been people of some prominence in Delhi at the turn of the century: his maternal grandfather had been *vakīl-i dār* to one of Balban's most trusted *amīrs* and, later, *shaḥna* of Lakhnawtī in Bengal; his father had been *nā'ib* to the second son of Sulṭān Jalāl al-Dīn Fīrūz Khaljī and later was in charge at Baran (now Bulandshahr) in the Dūāb; and an uncle had been *kōtwāl* of Delhi itself during the reign of Sultān 'Alā' al-Dīn Muḥammad Khaljī.[10] Presumably there was no background of slavery in the family and a free-born Central Asian *émigré* origin may be supposed. His *Fatwā-yi Jahāndārī* is strewn with denunciations of the kind of people of obscure origin favoured by the late Sulṭān, Muḥammad ibn Tughluq, and no doubt he viewed with jaundice Sulṭān Fīrūz Shāh Tughluq's employment of *ghulāms* in the administration on a scale perhaps exceeding anything known since before the rule of the Khaljīs. With this background in mind, Baranī's sweeping condemnation of the abuse of power and office by the slave-commanders of a century earlier assumes a deeper significance, for in castigating the misrule of the *chihilgānī* he surely had in mind—as would also his readers—the implications for their own time of this tale of oppression by all-powerful *ghulāms*.

Baranī makes six separate references to the *chihilgānī*, of which two refer specifically to individual *ghulāms*. Of the remaining four, the first comes at the beginning of the section dealing with the reign of Ghiyāth al-Dīn Balban where he states that the Sulṭān himself had been

> . . . one of the Shamsī slaves [e.g., a slave belonging to Sulṭān Shams al-Dīn Iltutmish] and among the forty Turkish slaves freed. . . .[11]

Further on, referring to the decay of the Sultanate following the death of Shams al-Dīn Iltutmish, he describes how under young and inexperienced rulers, devoted to self-indulgence, power and wealth had accumulated in the hands of the Shamsī slaves who had been made *khāns*, and during the reign of those Sultāns " those Turkish slaves who were called the *chihilgānī* became all-powerful in their control of the government " at the expense of the free-born *amīrs* and *maliks*.[12] Following the death of Sulṭān Shams al-Dīn Iltutmish the *chihilgānī* were successful in everything which they undertook.[13] Baranī also stresses their unwillingness to submit to any leader, even from among their own number, a fact which accounts for much of the hostility provoked by Balban's rise above the level of his peers. Baranī writes:

> . . . because the Shamsī slaves were all officers of the Household [the term *khwāja tāsh* refers to personal attendants of the Sulṭān] and because all forty were trained [together] in the same way, not one would take orders from or obey another.[14]

[9] P. Hardy, art. " Baranī ", *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new edn. (Leiden, 1960), II, p. 1036. Barani's place in the historiographical tradition of Muslim India is treated at length in Peter Hardy's *Historians of Medieval India* (London, 1960). K. A. Nizami adopts a rather different point of view in " Ziya-ud-Din Barani " in *Historians of Medieval India*, edited by M. Hasan (Meerut, 1969), pp. 37–52.

[10] *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, loc. cit.

[11] Ẓiyā' al-Dīn Baranī, *Ta'rīkh-i Fīrūz Shāhī*, edited by Sayyid Aḥmad Khān (Calcutta, 1862), p. 25: *Balban ki banda-yi az bandagān-i shamsī būd va dar miyān-i bandagān-i turk-i chihilgānī āzād shuda.*

[12] Ibid., p. 26: *Bandagān-i turk īshān-rā chihilgānī mīguftand bar umūr-i mamlakatī mustaulī shudand va bā quwwat va shaukat gashtand.*

[13] Ibid., p. 27: *Va ba'd-i naql-i Sulṭān Shams al-Dīn bandagān-i turk-i chihilgānī ū kāmyāb gashtand.*

[14] Ibid., p. 28: *Va az ānki bandagān-i shamsī khwāja tāsh būda va har chihil banda ba-yak karrat buzurg shudand yakī mar dīgarī-rā sar furū nayāvardī va iṭā'at nakardī.*

This is, in effect, virtually all the information available to us and it does not amount to very much. To sum up, the *chihilgānī* were a group of forty Turkish *ghulāms* (Baranī uses the term *banda*) who had originally belonged to Sulṭān Shams al-Dīn Iltutmish, who had all served together in the Sulṭān's entourage and who all attained the rank of *khān* so that each regarded himself as being the equal of the remaining thirty-nine.[15]

It is significant that Baranī makes mention of the *bandagān-i Shamsī* in general as well as of the *chihilgānī* in particular, and it is perhaps useful to enquire in what respect the *chihilgānī* differed from the other Shamsī slaves, some of whom, in the years following the death of Sulṭān Shams al-Dīn Iltutmish, also attained positions of great authority. The only clue appears to be that phrase which Baranī uses when he mentions the *chihilgānī* for the first time, including Balban " among the forty Turkish slaves freed. . . . "[16] Throughout the entire period when *ghulāms* were extensively employed in India, Iran and Central Asia the contemporary sources have little or nothing to say with regard to the question of manumission and whether, as slave commanders were promoted to the rank of *ḥājib* or *amīr*, their formal manumission was more or less automatic. For most practical purposes, of course, the question of legal status was irrelevant if a *ghulām* commanded the loyalty of a sufficient number of troops or had at his disposal the resources of a rich *iqṭā*'. Precisely what slave status meant under such circumstances is still far from clear. Apparently a slave could own another slave (Shams al-Dīn Iltutmish was the slave of Quṭb al-Dīn Aybak who was in turn the slave of Sulṭān Mu'izz al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Sām of Ghūr) and a master sometimes gave one of his daughters to a favourite slave (as Quṭb al-Dīn Aybak did with Shams al-Dīn Iltutmish). Perhaps the time when servile status mattered most to a high-ranking *ghulām* was at his death when there arose the question of how his property should be disposed of. Jūzjānī, for example, never makes any reference to Ghiyāth al-Dīn Balban's manumission although he describes his career in great detail from the time when he was first sold as a slave in Bagdad down to the time when he became the father-in-law of Sulṭān Nāṣir al-Dīn Maḥmūd and *de facto* master of Delhi. Apparently formal manumission was not a matter of great concern so far as high-ranking slave-commanders were concerned. When, therefore, Baranī describes the *chihilgānī* as freed Shamsī slaves he is surely indicating what set them apart from other slaves who belonged to Sulṭān Shams al-Dīn Iltutmish. It is possible—in my view, most likely—that all forty were manumitted at the same time, perhaps on some famous occasion of state long remembered by the inhabitants of Delhi, and thereby accounting for the fact that the sobriquet was still in circulation during Baranī's lifetime.[17] If so, the event may have occurred during the closing years of the reign of Sulṭān Shams al-Dīn Iltutmish or, conceivably, may have marked the accession to the throne of either Rukn al-Dīn Fīrūz or Rażiyya in 633/1236. Since, however, the manumission of slaves was regarded as an act of piety, frequently authorized by a master on his deathbed, it is not unreasonable to suppose that this celebrated band may well have obtained their freedom upon the death of Sulṭān Shams al-Dīn Iltutmish in 633/1236.

On his own admission, Baranī derived much of his knowledge of events in the preceding century from hearsay of his father and grandfather,[18] and we therefore cannot be quite certain that he is correct

[15] It should be noted that the historians of the Mughul period appear to have been content merely to elaborate upon Baranī's original statements. Thus Khwāja Niẓām al-Dīn Aḥmad, describing Balban's accession to the throne in the *Ṭabaqāt-i Akbarī*, edited by B. De (Calcutta, 1913), p. 78, simply states:

> Sulṭān Ghiyāth al-Dīn was the slave of Sulṭān Shams al-Dīn, one of the band of slaves known as the *chihilgānī*. Sulṭān Shams al-Dīn had forty Turkish slaves each one of whom reached the rank of *amīr* and this band was spoken of as the *chihilgānī*.

This is clearly taken straight from the *Ta'rīkh-i Fīrūz Shāhī*, which Khwāja Niẓām al-Dīn Aḥmad lists among his sources, but the same is true of 'Abd al-Qādir Badā'ūnī in his *Muntakhab al-Tawārīkh*. At the beginning of the seventeenth century Firishta in his *Gulshan-i Ibrāhīmī* expanded this brief statement, at the same time taking considerable licence with his sources. The translation here used is that of J. Briggs, *History of the Rise of the Mahomedan Power in India*, London, 1829, 4 vols., I, p. 249.

> In the reign of Shums-ood-Deen Altmish, Forty of his Toorky slaves, who were in great favour, entered into a solemn covenant to support each other, and on the King's death to divide the empire among themselves. Jealousies and dissensions afterwards arose among them, and prevented this project from being carried into execution.

[16] Baranī, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

[17] A famous occasion upon which one thousand slaves were manumitted was the feast given by the 'Abbāsid Caliph al-Mutawakkil (232–247/847–861) to celebrate the circumcision of his son al-Mu'tazz. See C. E. Bosworth, *The Book of Curious and Entertaining Information. The Laṭā'if al-ma'ārif of Tha'ālibī* (Edinburgh, 1968), pp. 100–101.

[18] Baranī, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

when he asserts that the *chihilgānī* were a group originally composed of forty slaves, and that the term was not used merely in the Biblical sense of meaning a large number. But assuming for the sake of argument that there was in existence around 633/1236 a band of forty recently-manumitted slave-commanders who constituted a more or less cohesive group, it is surely unrealistic to suppose that a decade or so later the group was still numerically intact and was collectively stage-managing the palace-revolutions which, following the disappearance of Rukn al-Dīn Fīrūz and Raẓiyya, resulted in the elevation first of Mu'izz al-Dīn Bahrām (637–639/1240–1242), then of 'Alā' al-Dīn Mas'ūd (639–644/1242–1246), and finally of Nāṣir al-Dīn Maḥmūd (644–664/1246–1266) to the throne. Sir Wolseley Haig in *The Cambridge History of India* presupposes that even after Balban's sucession the *chihilgānī* still existed as a cohesive group and that, indeed, most of the great nobles of the court were to be counted among their number.[19] But on grounds of mathematical probability alone, this would seem highly unlikely. If it be assumed that the original *chihilgānī* were already high-ranking slave commanders, *ḥājibs* and *amīrs*, around the time of the death of Sulṭān Shams al-Dīn Iltutmish, this presupposes that they were already in their mid-thirties. Two centuries earlier the Saljūq *vazīr*, Niẓām al-Mulk (408–485/1018–1092), had expressed the opinion in his *Siyāsat-nāma* that thirty-five was a suitable age for promoting a *ghulām* of outstanding ability to the rank of *amīr*,[20] and although it would be dangerous to apply without qualification Niẓām al-Mulk's *cursus honorum* for the training of *ghulāms* in eleventh century Iran to the circumstances of the thirteenth century Delhi Sultanate, the fact remains that the little we know about the early career of Balban and his contemporaries suggests that it was indeed around this age that they obtained independent commands and high office. In 664/1266, when Balban—by murder or by default of a candidate with a better claim—at last succeeded his son-in-law, he was already a sexagenarian, albeit an active one, but such other members of the original *chihilgānī* who were still alive cannot have been any younger. But in any case, given the probable expectation of life of a thirteenth century Turkish warlord, it would seem unrealistic to suppose that more than a handful of the original band of forty survived to witness the elevation of the most ruthless and most successful of their number to their former master's throne.

In his account of Balban's reign Baranī names only three *amīrs* as belonging specifically to the *chihilgānī*—Balban himself; the Sulṭān's cousin, Shīr Khān Sunqur, governor of Lahore and Bhatinda; and a certain Tamar Khān, who was granted some of Shīr Khān Sunqur's *iqṭā's* after the latter's death. Shīr Khān Sunqur is, of course, a comparatively well-known figure, but nothing is known of Tamar Khān beyond this single fact, and in designating him one of the *chihilgānī* it is not impossible that Baranī has confused him with the great Qipchāq *amīr*, Malik Tamar Khān-i Qirān, a governor of Awadh who died in 644/1246.

Apart from these three, no other *amīrs* are described as belonging to the *chihilgānī*, although reference is made to former Shamsī slaves as well as to slaves belonging to Balban himself—all of whom, for no very obvious reason, Sir Wolseley Haig assigns to that select band. Had, for example, Baranī, on the basis of the information available to him, reckoned Shamsī slaves such as 'Ādil Khān and Tabar Khan, who were on terms of intimacy with Balban, among the *chihilgānī*, he would have surely said so. On the other hand, given the nature of the sources available to him, it is probable that while Baranī may have heard a good deal concerning the *chihilgānī* collectively, he may only have ever known the names of a handful of them. Thus he mentions two *amīrs* who, in my view, should probably be included among the *chihilgānī*: Arslan Khān Sanjar, the rebel governor of Bengal who died in 662/1264 and whose son, Tātār Arslan Khan, promptly submitted to Balban upon the latter's accession; and Balban's own brother, Malik Kishlū Khān. However, neither of these are allocated a place among the Forty.

Mention has already been made of the fact that Jūzjānī never uses the term *chihilganī* at all. What he does do, however, is to include in the *Ṭabaqāt-i Nāṣirī* a section, approaching perhaps one-tenth of the whole work, which is a *tadhkirat* or collection of short biographical sketches of the twenty-five principal Shamsī *maliks*. All these twenty-five were Turks—Qipchāqī, Ilbārī, etc.,—with only one

[19] *The Cambridge History of India*, III, pp. 74–78.

[20] Niẓām al-Mulk, *op. cit.*, p. 134, tr. p. 107. See also C. E. Bosworth, *The Ghaznavids* (Edinburgh, 1963), pp. 102–103.